



FIFTH DISEASE

What is FIFTH DISEASE?

Fifth Disease (Erythema infectiosum), is a contagious, mild illness caused by a virus. It only infects humans and occurs most commonly in children. (Pet dogs and cats may be immunized against "parvovirus," but these are animal parvoviruses that do not infect humans.) Outbreaks of fifth disease usually begin in late winter or early spring and may continue until school recesses for the summer. As many as 15% of children aged 1 to 5 years have had fifth disease, and up to 60% of the adult population has been exposed to this disease.

How is Fifth Disease spread?

Fifth Disease is spread from person to person through contact with infected respiratory secretions from an infected person's cough or sneeze. The virus also spreads when a person touches surfaces that are contaminated with respiratory secretions (drinking cups and eating utensils) and then touch the eyes or mouth. People are most likely to spread the disease before symptoms start. It takes between four and 20 days for symptoms to appear after exposure to the virus.

What are the symptoms of Fifth Disease?

The ill child typically has a "slapped cheek" rash on the face and a lacy red rash on the trunk and limbs. Occasionally, the rash may itch. The child may have a low-grade fever or cold symptoms a few days before the rash appears. The rash usually resolves in 7-10 days. (By the time a child has the characteristic rash; they are no longer contagious and may return to school or childcare setting). Exposure to sunlight or stress can cause the rash to reappear even though the child is over the disease.

An adult who is not immune can be infected and either have no symptoms, or develop the typical rash, joint pain or swelling, or both. About 50% of adults who were previously infected develop immunity to the virus and cannot get Fifth Disease. In adults, the rash is often hard to see. Anemia may develop in children or adults, especially if the person has sickle cell disease. If a pregnant woman becomes infected, the unborn child may become infected and harmed. People with weakened immune systems may develop severe, chronic anemia.

How is Fifth Disease treated?

There is no medicine or vaccine available to prevent the disease. Treating symptoms such as fever, pain or itching is usually all that is needed. The few people who develop severe anemia may require hospitalization for blood transfusions.

What can I do to prevent myself from getting Fifth Disease?

Frequent hand washing is recommended as a practical, and probably effective, method to decrease the chance of becoming infected and limiting the virus' spread.

Should I keep my child home from school or daycare after being diagnosed?

Excluding persons from work, schools, or childcare centers is not likely to prevent the spread of the virus, since people are contagious before they develop the rash. Exposed pregnant women and those with weakened immune systems should consult their physician for advice.